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CHAPTER V

**FROM RATIONAL DOCTRINE TO
CHRISTIAN WISDOM**

PETER JONKERS

INTRODUCTION: AN UNWORLDLY CHURCH

In his address in Freiburg of September 25, 2011, Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI raised the same question as the one that is the ‘leitmotiv’ of this volume, namely, how the Catholic Church, taking for granted that it has become a minority in Western Europe, can relate to today’s world of seekers in such a way that its message will be heard and followed. In particular, Benedict asks whether the Church, in order to realize this goal, must “not adapt her offices and structures to the present day, in order to reach the searching and doubting people of today.”¹ Fundamentally, it goes without saying that the Church is called to constant change; in other words, it must constantly rededicate itself to its apostolic mission. But for Benedict, this mission does not, by any means, coincide with the Church becoming worldlier and adapting to the actual world. On the contrary, “in order to accomplish her mission, she will need again and again to set herself apart from her surroundings, to become in a certain sense ‘unworldly’.”² Keeping in mind that Benedict gave his address almost half a century after the opening session of the Second Vatican Council, which took as its motto the ‘aggiornamento’, that is, the opening up of the Church to modern society, his bold answer to this question strikes us. With his plea for a detachment of the Church from the world, he clearly expresses his opposition against the accommodation strategies in the aftermath of Vatican II. But does he go so far as to say that the Church should undo again its recent opening up to the world? In order to avoid this and other misunderstandings, let us start with investigating what Benedict exactly intends with his plea for an ‘unworldly’ Church, and then examine how his call relates to the often heard complaint that the Church’s detachment from the modern world has brought about a disjunction with it.

¹ Benedict XVI, *Address of His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI in Freiburg im Breisgau, Sunday, September 25, 2011* (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2011). In the plain text, I refer to the Church with the neutral ‘it’, but when quoting Pope Emeritus Benedict, I adopt his use of the feminine when referring to the Church.

² Ibid.

First of all, it has to be noted that, for Benedict, ‘becoming unworldly’ (in the German original: *Entweltlichung*) is a theological concept. Thus, it has to be understood in line with the word of the Gospel that Christians are indeed *in* but not *of* the world.³ From this perspective, it is no wonder that he criticizes a Church that has become too much ‘of the world’: a worldly “Church becomes self-satisfied, settles down in this world, becomes self-sufficient and adapts herself to the standards of the world.”⁴ Hence, by detaching itself from the world, the Church actually returns to its original vocation of being the salt of the earth. Therefore, paradoxically, Benedict welcomes the secularization process in the sociological or juridical sense of the word as a necessary step in order to untie the traditional knot between Church and society, thereby referring to well-known examples of secularization, such as the expropriation of Church goods or elimination of its privileges.⁵ He qualifies this process not as a loss, but rather as a liberation of the Church from all kinds of problematic forms of worldliness.

But the above-quoted passage from the gospel also says that Christians are *in* the world. So, Benedict’s proposal for the Church’s detachment from the world should not be misunderstood as a plea for a complete withdrawal from it, leading to a fateful separation between the Church and the world. On the contrary, if the Church is liberated from its material and political burdens and privileges, it is far better equipped to fulfill its missionary task: it can reach out more effectively and in a truly Christian way to the whole world, and be truly open to it. To phrase it paradoxically, insofar as it resolutely moves away from its worldliness, that is, from its problematic alliance with the world as it actually is, the Church “open[s] up afresh to the cares of the world, to which she herself belongs, and give herself over to them.”⁶ In sum, characteristic of an unworldly Church is that it is “not bracketing or ignoring anything from the truth of our present situation, but living the faith fully here and now in the utterly sober light of day, appropriating it completely, and stripping

³ John, 17:16. In his address, Benedict refers to this passage; see Benedict XVI, *Address of September 25, 2011*. I developed this theme in: Peter Jonkers, “In the world, but not of the world. The prospects of Christianity in the modern world,” *Bijdragen* 61 (2000), pp. 370-389.

⁴ Benedict XVI, *Address of September 25, 2011*.

⁵ Ibid. Unfortunately, F.-X. Kaufmann interprets the address of Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI primarily in this sociological and juridical way, and thereby fails to see its theological intention. See Franz-Xaver Kaufmann, “Entweltlichte Kirche?” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (Gegenwart)*. January 7, 2012, p. 11.

⁶ Benedict XVI, *Address of September 25, 2011*.

away from it anything that only seems to belong to faith, but in truth is mere convention or habit.”⁷

According to Benedict, the ‘unworldly’ mission of the Church in this world “is built first of all upon personal experience: ‘You are witnesses’ (*Lk* 24:48); it finds expression in relationships: ‘Make disciples of all nations’ (*Mt* 28:19); and it spreads a universal message: ‘Preach the Gospel to the whole creation’ (*Mk* 16:15).”⁸ These keywords – personal experience, relationships, and universal message – show that Christian faith starts with a personal experience of God, who calls on us to put our lives in the sign of the risen Lord, secondly, that this experience is expressed in and shared with a community of likeminded people, and, finally, that it is preached to the whole world as a message of hope. In other words, faith starts with the lived life, which can only thereafter be reflected upon theoretically (or theologically) and laid down in doctrines. Referring to the title of this paper, Christian faith is not primarily a rational doctrine, but an expression of wisdom.

In a certain sense, Benedict’s plea for an unworldly Church is meant to highlight its kenotic character. According to Waclaw Hryniewicz, the word ‘kenosis’ means self-limitation, self-resignation. It refers to a God, whose liberating love for people is a self-emptying one and does not overpower them, to Jesus, who humiliated himself on the cross and thereby negated all self-centeredness and self-interestedness, and to a vision of the Church that is critical of its ecclesiastical egoisms, self-centeredness, and self-satisfaction, or, phrased positively, a Church that is more friendly to people, closer to the poor, especially to those who have lost hope and meaning in their lives, and open to dialogue with those who do not believe.⁹ Accordingly, Benedict is strongly convinced that Christians should let go of all self-centeredness, and that the Church should distance itself from its ecclesiastical egoisms and self-satisfaction, so that the Church “opens herself to the world not in order to win men for an institution with its own claims to power, but in order to lead them to themselves by leading them to him of whom each person can say with Saint Augustine: he is closer to me than I am to myself.”¹⁰ But, on the other hand, Benedict’s critique of the modern world is so radical that he is often suspected of completely turning his back to it. He despises its moral, cultural, and intellectual relativism and its reductionist positivism, and is convinced that these ills can only be cured by relying on a trans-

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Waclaw Hryniewicz, *The Spirit: The Cry of the World* (Washington D.C.: The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2014), p. ix.

¹⁰ Benedict XVI, *Address of September 25, 2011*.

historical idea of truth and goodness.¹¹ By adopting this position he seems to overpower the authentic search for meaning and hope of today's seekers and to overwhelm them with fixed certainties. In the eyes of many, this has led to the disjunction that this volume precisely wants to overcome: many seekers inside and outside the Church think that it does not take their quest for spiritual healing and moral orientation seriously, and, hence, that it is not really interested in a dialogue with them.

Thus, the fundamental question that rises in this respect is whether the Church can be unworldly, i.e., refraining from becoming *of* the world, while being at the same time capable of bridging its disjunction with the world, i.e., to be truly *in* the world? Phrased in this way, Benedict's plea for an unworldly Church seems to be as old as the Christian message itself: Christ himself has reminded his followers that their true destiny does not lay in this world, so they can never feel completely comfortable with the world as it is. But Benedict's critique of the relation between the Church and today's world is more specific and fundamental: he is convinced that, in our times, the Church has become too worldly, so that it is no longer capable of listening and responding to the existential needs of today's seekers. To put it more concretely, in spite of the line that the Church has adopted following the Second Vatican Council, namely, to open itself up to the world, it has not really been able to bridge its disjunction with the world. This observation is substantiated, at least in most Western societies, by the fact that the number of people acknowledging that the true destiny of their lives lies in Christian faith has been decreasing dramatically. Many others are seeking for meaning in rather indiscriminate ways,¹² often unaware of what they are seeking, but in any case rather loath to what the major religious traditions have on offer. But the overall majority does not seek at all, either actively or passively, either inside or outside the Church. Against this background, it is no wonder that Benedict wants to try another approach, and places his bets on a voice that aims to relate to the actual world from a more external position. In other words, he thinks that an 'unworldly' Church is far better able to help seekers find meaning in life and put things in the right perspective than a worldly one. But, in spite of all his good intentions, the question remains whether his fierce opposition to the modern world will

¹¹ Heiko Nüllmann, *Logos Gottes und Logos des Menschen. Der Vernunftbegriff Joseph Ratzingers und seine Implikationen für Glaubensverantwortung, Moralbegründung und interreligiösen Dialog* (Würzburg: Echter Verlag, 2012), pp. 305-312.

¹² The indiscriminate character of this search in contemporary society, which has been substantiated by a lot of sociological research, has brought me to describe it in the introduction to this volume as one of 'longing without belonging'.

not result in a Church that is completely out of touch with it so that, eventually, its voice will not be heard anymore. Such an outcome would not only be counterproductive for the Church, but also, and more importantly, be quite the opposite of the very essence of a kenotic Church, namely, a Church that is truly *in* the world, that opens itself up to the cares of the world, offering it meaning and hope.

In sum, Benedict's plea for an unworldly Church confronts the leading question of this volume of how to overcome the disjunction between the Church and the world of the seekers, with an intriguing paradox: How can the Church remain faithful to its true mission, which is fundamentally an unworldly one, while at the same time opening itself up in a truthful way to the world, that is, keeping in touch with the spiritual needs of people who are seeking meaning and orientation in their lives? It is obvious that this paradox cannot be avoided, and even less be solved, because it belongs to the essence of Christian faith. Instead, I want to shed some light on this paradox by investigating two central ideas from Benedict's address in Freiburg from the perspective of the leading question of this volume.

First, I want to discuss the implications of Benedict's idea that faith has to start from the experience of the lived life, which is then linked to the Christian tradition and shared in a community of faith, and preached to the whole world. I will show that this comes down to an idea of Christian faith as an expression of wisdom, which is able to orientate people towards living the good life and prepare them for the eternal life. Accepting the idea that Christian faith is first of all an expression of wisdom opens a perspective for the Church to bridge its disjunction with today's world by taking to heart the existential quest of the seekers, and responding to it by offering elements of Christian wisdom. Phrased negatively, such an approach means that the Church distances itself from an idea of faith as a set of fixed philosophic-theological certainties.

Second, and in relation with the first point, I want to examine more closely the idea of a kenotic Church, willing to give up its worldly power and privileges and to become more humble. Because such a Church aligns what it teaches and preaches with its own lived life, thereby admitting that Christians have nothing more than their sins to place before God,¹³ it will invite people to live their lives from a Christian perspective rather than overwhelm them with its teachings, encourage them to accept the Kingdom of God as their ultimate destiny rather than impose a set of moral do's and don'ts. Such a Church is able to let its missionary witness shine more brightly and reach out to the whole world, including to non-believers. Moreover, by recognizing the pivotal importance of its kenotic

¹³ Benedict XVI, *Address of September 25, 2011*.

character, the Church will also be able to take a more welcoming attitude towards other religions in the interreligious dialogue.

My aim is to examine these two aspects of an unworldly Church from a philosophical perspective. In particular, I will ask whether these two ideas are indeed capable of overcoming the disjunction between the Church and the world of the seekers in a truthful way. Hence, I will leave the theological implications of these ideas aside, including Benedict's further development of them.¹⁴ In order to clarify the kind of Christian wisdom and kenotic Church I am aiming at, I will start with contrasting them with two important features of Catholic faith during the second half of the 19th and the first half of the 20th century, namely, ultramontane mass Catholicism and neo-Thomism. Then, I will give a short analysis of the world of today's seekers, focusing on one of its most problematic characteristics, viz., the self-centered character of postmodern individuals and their lack of truthful life-orientations. In the final section, I will examine whether an interpretation of Christian faith in terms of wisdom is able to bridge the disjunction between the Church and the world of the seekers.

ULTRAMONTANE MASS CATHOLICISM AND NEO-THOMISM

Ultramontane Mass Catholicism

The development of the Catholic Church during the second half of the 19th and the first half of the 20th century can first of all be characterized as the rise of ultramontane mass Catholicism.¹⁵ Although it originated in France

¹⁴ For an analysis of and critical discussion with Benedict's ideas on the relevance of the Church for contemporary society see Peter Jonkers, "A Purifying Force for Reason. Pope Benedict on the Role of Christianity in Advanced Modernity," *Towards a New Catholic Church in Advanced Modernity. Transformations, Visions, Tensions* (Münster: Lit Verlag, 2012), pp. 79-102; and Peter Jonkers, "A Philosophical Faith. Pope Benedict's Response to Rawls," *Rawls and Religion* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), forthcoming.

¹⁵ For the coining of this term and its development see Staf Helleman, "A Critical Transition. From Ultramontane Mass Catholicism to Choice Catholicism," *The Catholic Church and Modernity in Europe* (Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2009), pp. 37-39; Staf Helleman, "Tracking the New Shape of the Catholic Church in the West," *Towards a New Catholic Church in Advanced Modernity. Transformations, Visions, Tensions*, pp. 21-23. In the first part of this section, I draw extensively from his work on this topic as well as from Wilhelm Damberg, "The Catholic Church and European Catholicism after 1945. Moving Towards Convergence of Diversity and Fragmentation?," *The Catholic Church and Modernity in Europe*, pp. 18-21.

in the 17th and 18th centuries, this model proved to be especially successful in the Low Countries, leading to the so-called compartmentalized or pillarized society, which combined societal pluralism with a strong homogeneity inside each (religious) compartment. During this period, the Church became a highly centralized mass organization, independent of the state, oriented towards the Pope in Rome (hence: ultramontane or ‘beyond the Alps’), and capable of integrating and mobilizing its flock massively. The Pope advanced to become the daily leader in Church affairs, multiplying his interventions through encyclical letters and other statements. Bishops became fully dependent on the Pope’s authority, and priests, in turn, on their bishop’s will. As the nation state established a standardized structure of government and economy, the Catholic Church developed its own internal organization in order to compete with the nation state. At the same time, the Church followed the nation states’ example with regard to the centralization and standardization of its members’ ways of life, so that, in the end, the Catholic Church increasingly demonstrated traits which could easily be accorded to a ‘modern’ state. Catholics were educated to a higher standard by better trained priests and nuns, their daily lives were regulated by religious obligations from dawn till dusk, they were organized in a host of religious associations, and they were mobilized – sometimes in unprecedented numbers – in processions and pilgrimages. By the end of the 19th century, the ecclesiastical mass organizational model was extended to more secular areas: many large Catholic lay organizations were established in the fields of education, charity, culture, recreation, and even trade unions and political parties. The overall result was the construction of an impressive Catholic counter-society, which gave the Church unprecedented power and influence, both in strictly religious and more mundane affairs.

To my mind, in spite of all its merits, ultramontane mass Catholicism is an exemplification of a Church that had become – to use Benedict’s words – too worldly: it was a Church that was characterized by triumphalism and self-centeredness, relying on its traditional privileges, on its property, its formal and informal political power and influence, and on its use of social pressure, if need be, in order to impose its views, laws, and practices on the Catholic pillar of society, and sometimes even on society at large. In sum, ultramontane mass Catholicism was the opposite of a kenotic Church. The Second Vatican Council took the brave decision to distance the Church from this ecclesiastical model and to open it up to the modern world in a new way. But, as the dwindling numbers of faithful have shown, an evolution that started in the 1960s and is still continuing, it failed to reach the modern world and to respond to its needs. This obvious lack of success was not so much due to the fact that the Church is not yet worldly enough, but because it was caught off guard by the consequences of the individualist

and expressivist turns, which society has taken since the second half of the 20th century, as well as by the impact of the growing plurality of individual and collective religious and secular lifestyles on its hierarchical structure, on the content of its doctrine, and on the way to convey it to the people. Among many other things, these elements have made people loath to any authority and hierarchical organization. In this respect, the fate of the Catholic Church does not differ from that of governments, political parties, trade unions, cultural organizations, etc.

Since expressive individualism and pluralism profoundly mark the lives of the people in all Western societies, the above-mentioned paradox of the Church, being *in* but not *of* the world, can be further defined: How can the Church constructively engage in a dialogue with the seekers and their rather vague, eclectic, and mostly implicit ways of life, without becoming *of* the world, that is, identifying so completely with their lifestyles that it loses its identity and is no longer appealing anymore, because incapable to offer them orientation and meaning? As will be shown in the next sections, I think that a kenotic Church is able to respond to this paradox appropriately, and, hence, will be able to bridge its disjunction with the seekers.

Neo-Thomism

Ultramontane mass Catholicism went hand-in-hand with a specific way in which the Church formulated and substantiated its doctrine, namely, neo-Thomism. The main reason for neo-Thomism's popularity was that it proved to be able to answer the specifically modern shape of the question of the relation between faith and reason, namely, the rift between faith and scientific rationality. Especially since the second half of the 19th century, when positivism became more and more popular, this rift became a real threat for religion and theology. Positivism claimed that the religious and the metaphysical types of explanation, culminating in the arguments for God's existence and the immortality of the soul, were irrational, and had to be replaced by a type of explanation that was based only on 'positive', empirical facts.

Confronted with this threat, it was no wonder that the Church felt an urgent need to keep the progress of positivism in check, especially in the light of its growing popularity among the intelligentsia. Hence, it looked for a way to prove the fundamentals of Christian faith as objectively and scientifically as possible, so that they could stand the challenge of positivism. The result was neo-Thomism, which claimed to be a return to Thomas Aquinas, who, in his own time, had developed a synthesis of faith and reason. However, in comparison to the *pre-modern theology* of Thomas Aquinas, neo-Thomism actually had all the characteristics of *modern philosophy*, resting on the conviction that there

was a natural agreement between modern, rationalistic metaphysics and Christian faith. The neo-Thomist doctrine of God is an excellent illustration of this agreement. It understood God in ontological terms, namely, as Being itself, and concluded that Being is the proper name of God and that this name designates God's very essence. This highlights the ontotheological character of neo-Thomism: it conjoined the Biblical verse, in which God reveals his name, with modern ontology, and gave priority to the ontological problem of God's existence over the religious question of his name, and to philosophical argument over religious narrative. Another important aspect of neo-Thomism was that it substantiated in a rational way the (moral) ends of science and technology, and thus presented an alternative to the growing influence of social Darwinism on morality.

With hindsight, neo-Thomism was a well-developed attempt to bridge an important aspect of the disjunction between Christian faith and the modern world, namely, to adapt the former to modern philosophy and the scientific worldview. But, by doing so, it inevitably accepted the presuppositions of modern rationality. In particular, its ontological approach of God was as rationalistic and foundational as modern science. Because of this, neo-Thomism was able to enter into a constructive discussion with modern science and, indeed, offered an alternative to positivism. But, as we shall see in the fourth section in more detail, the flipside of this was that through the dominance of this rationalistic and foundational approach, Christian faith became too worldly. In particular, it took on too much of the appearance of a closed, quasi scientific system: very abstract, involved in metaphysical debates about God's existence as the ultimate foundation of reality, and having definitive and fixed answers to people's existential quests for meaning and hope. Phrased negatively, it failed to do justice to the apophatic tradition, which has played a crucial role in the Christian tradition of thinking God ever since Pseudo-Dionysius. Furthermore, it de-contextualized the religious idea of God by abstracting from the various practices of faith and their socio-historic and existential context: the God of neo-Thomistic philosophy does not function and does not have to function in the concrete contexts of personal piety or communal worship. Hence, neo-Thomism lost sight of these and many other, particularly existential, aspects of Christian faith, e.g., that it is first of all an expression of lived wisdom, commending a way of life, and embedded in a narrative. In other words, Christian faith is the trusting of God's promise of salvation and orientating one's life in accordance with this trust, not the conclusion of a rational philosophical argument. Once that expressive individualism and the ethics of authenticity had permeated Western society, it became clear that Christian faith was dramatically lacking the dialogical and kenotic attitude, which is imperative to relate its wisdom tradition to the existential quest of today's

individuals. So, a second aspect of the Church's response to the paradox of being *in* the world, i.e., overcoming its disjunction with the world of the seekers, without becoming *of* the world, i.e., getting totally absorbed in the expressive individualist mood and its lack of a larger perspective, consists in making the transition from a doctrinal, in particular neo-Thomist, to an existential, in particular wisdom-orientated, approach of Christian faith, and show the seekers that it offers hope and meaning to their lives.

THE SEEKERS AND THEIR CONTINGENT LIFESTYLES AND NARRATIVES

Before giving two examples of how the (Catholic) Church can bridge its disjunction with the seekers, I first want to present a short outline of the world in which they are living, especially with regard to their basic attitude towards the variety of lifestyles, Christian and secular. As a consequence of the deepening impact of expressive individualism on all Western societies since the 1960s, the compartmentalized society with its strong, hierarchical subsocieties has collapsed. As said, this process not only affected the (Catholic) Church, but all major societal organizations and even the state itself. The overall result is a society consisting of individualized individuals, who are embedded in multicultural and globalizing networks, gathering from time to time in smaller or larger groups around specific issues, one of which is religion. People who feel attracted to religion can, thanks to the rise of new institutional religions, the ubiquity of religious books and the internet, and the growing popularity of the tourist and legacy industries, opt for a wide variety in religious offerings inside as well as outside the traditional churches. Moreover, the predicament of choice cannot be reduced to a couple of 'big' choices to which one remains loyal throughout one's life. On the contrary, choice has become a never-ending process of muddling through a panoply of small choices, and keeping one's involvements and loyalties under the constant check of new choices.¹⁶

The above explains the rise of a plurality of (religious) lifestyles and their underpinning narratives, which characterizes the world of today's seekers. Moreover, this plurality goes hand-in-hand with the conviction that all lifestyles are nothing but contingent social constructions of reality, lacking a reasonable ground, only being chosen on the basis of the subjective feeling of their attractiveness, permanently open to reconsideration, and offering raw material for endless re-

¹⁶ Hellemans, "Tracking the New Shape of the Catholic Church in the West," pp. 24-26.

descriptions.¹⁷ Rorty, who has given a philosophical underpinning of this view, calls these lifestyles and narratives ‘final vocabularies’, which can only be substantiated by circular arguments whose strength does not reach beyond the persons or communities using them. Confronted with this situation, the seekers, especially the active ones, run the risk of becoming ironic, that is, “never quite able to take themselves seriously because [they are] always aware that the terms in which they describe themselves are subject to change, always aware of the contingency and fragility of their final vocabularies [i.e., the narratives underpinning their lifestyles], and thus of their selves.”¹⁸ They put this into practice by continually re-describing themselves, society, and the world in ever new ways, by constantly re-creating themselves without referring to any normative eternal examples, like God, the Absolute, reason, truth, etc. In other words, they are constantly inclined to give up one vocabulary in favor of another, but never find peace in any of them. Consequently, they run the risk of not belonging to anything anymore, of completely losing their identity.

Rorty suggests a pragmatic way of dealing with this predicament, namely, to devote oneself to the vocabulary one is familiar with and, consequently, simply declare that there are limits to what one can take seriously. Many seekers opt for this pragmatic attitude: for the time being, they are committed to a (religious) lifestyle and take its underpinning narrative for granted, although they are at the same time aware that their attachment is completely contingent and that its underpinning narrative is circular; they believe in it only because they happen to be a member of this specific club and feel attracted to it for personal reasons. However, in order to work in today’s pluralist society, in which a common ground is almost completely lacking, especially when it comes to the day-to-day do’s and don’ts, their partisanship for a specific vocabulary has to remain confined to the private sphere, while in public they are expected to take a completely neutral attitude in order to safeguard peaceful co-existence.

It is obvious that this pragmatic attitude, which is not only taken by most seekers (active and passive ones), but is paradigmatic for our postmodern condition as such, poses fundamental problems. To start with, many of our substantial attachments, such as the kind of food we prefer, our morning or evening rituals, and even our native language, are indeed contingent matters, so that any claim to their truth makes no sense and is

¹⁷ I developed this further in Peter Jonkers, “Contingent Religions, Contingent Truths?” *Religions Challenged by Contingency. Theological and Philosophical Perspectives to the Problem of Contingency* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), pp. 167-170, and in Jonkers, “A Purifying Force For Reason,” pp. 82-85.

¹⁸ Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 73f.

sometimes even inappropriate. But does this reasoning hold for our substantial commitments to (religious or secular) ways of life as well, which define our identity on a practical level? Are these commitments nothing but the expression of our personal attachment to a contingent lifestyle? If this were the case, people should not find any difficulties in performing a sort of ‘mental acrobatics’, namely, to be substantially committed in the private domain to their ways of life while, at the same time, recognizing their sheer contingency in the public domain. This quandary between private and public life becomes even more acute when religious people, who are convinced of the truth of their faith, enter the public domain in which, according to this postmodern paradigm, everyone is expected to take a completely neutral attitude: Are they really prepared to sing their religious song in the choir of the public debate under the condition that they keep their mouths shut?

Actually, I don’t think that humans are capable of performing such mental acrobatics, or that they are prepared to keep quiet in the public debate, nor should they. In contexts of both religious and secular ways of life people use words like ‘authentic’, ‘true’, and ‘universal’ in order to express something that not only counts for themselves or a small group of like-minded peers, but deserves to be recognized publicly. Obviously, the striving for public recognition of diverging ways of life often appears to be a painful confrontation of irreconcilable practices. Nevertheless, this striving shows that there is something essential at stake: others ask us to recognize that their ways of life are authentic attempts to realize fundamental human values, although we may completely disagree with them. In other words, the striving for public recognition of ways of life can only take place against the background of conflicting substantial meanings, because only then all partners in this process realize that there is something essential at stake. Therefore, we feel deeply frustrated when others don’t take these meanings seriously, and reduce them to contingent, private opinions whose acceptance does not rest upon their substance, but merely upon one’s subjective right to lead one’s own life, and on their not causing too much of a fuss.

What matters to me here is the fact that, in our striving for public recognition, we reach out towards something essential, towards an existential truth which is beyond our subjective, contingent self. In the end, we don’t want to be left alone with our contingent convictions and practices, nor are we prepared to leave others alone with theirs. We humans are too finite to be left alone with our own finitude, too dependent on the recognition of our substantial meanings by others to seriously consider ourselves as the only creators of truth and meaning in a meaningless world. This implies that the ‘mental acrobatics’ that is required to be a full member of the postmodern circus of life-styles, bidding for the public’s favor, falls short of expectations. We cannot live

with the idea that all our substantial attachments, which are essential for our identity, are, in the public domain, completely contingent. In many cases, we make use – at least implicitly – of notions like authenticity and truth, and by doing so, we claim that these commitments transcend the level of contingent social constructions.

It has to be noted that this argument should not be understood as a plea for *exclusive* recognition, which leads to opposing one religious or secular way of life to all the others. On the contrary, democratic societies can only exist by the grace of a plurality of religions and philosophies of life. But, in any case, the fact that people are so anxious to have their (religious or secular) ways of life publicly recognized, and are prepared to discuss them fiercely in the public debate, raises these traditions above the level of sheer contingency. With regard to the prime concern of this paper of how to overcome the disjunction between the Church and the seekers, the fact that so many people are caught nowadays in the paradox of being convinced of the contingency of their ways of life, while at the same time striving for an authentic and truthful orientation in life, offers a fruitful prospect for the Church: from a kenotic redefinition of its mission in the world, it can offer to today's seekers such an orientation without overwhelming their quest for meaning and hope with fixed, pre-given answers. It can do so by focusing on faith as a tradition of wisdom, as I will develop in more detail in the next section.

CHRISTIAN WISDOM AS A RESPONSE TO THE SEEKERS

The previous sections have made clear the paradoxical situation of the seekers as well as the main reasons why it has been so difficult for the Church to bridge its disjunction with them. They are caught between their gut feeling that all religions are but contingent social constructions and their need for an authentic and truthful orientation in life. The Church, for its part, has not yet been able, after the collapse of ultramontane mass Catholicism and rationalist neo-Thomism, to respond to the challenges of the increase of individual lifestyles and the radical plurality of worldviews. But the previous sections also resulted in two positive suggestions about how the Church can respond positively to the paradox that constitutes its essence, namely, to be *in* but not *of* the world: through its tradition of wisdom, it can offer the seekers concrete examples of truthful life-orientations, and thus bridge its disjunction with them, while at the same time holding on to the transcendent character of this orientation, without which it would lose its identity. First, it needs to engage in a constructive dialogue with the individualized lifestyles of the seekers and with the plurality of worldviews. Second, in order to be able to do so, the Church should take a modest and even kenotic stance. This enables it to present Christian faith as an authentic and truthful way of

life, and offer it to the seekers as a response to their searching, but without overwhelming them with fixed, pre-given answers.¹⁹ These two suggestions can be seen as exemplifications of a longstanding tradition in Christianity, namely, that of Christian wisdom. In what follows, I will develop in more detail the idea of Christian wisdom in a pluralistic world, and explore whether it contributes to bridging the disjunction of the Church with the seekers.

In the introduction of his book on Christian wisdom, David Ford notes that wisdom may be making a comeback, after being associated for a long time with old people, tradition, and conservative caution in a culture of youth, modernization, innovation, and risky exploration. The revival of wisdom is especially evident in areas where knowledge and (technical) know-how come up against questions of ethics, values, beauty, the shaping and flourishing of the whole person, the common good, and long-term perspectives.²⁰ Any wisdom needs to take seriously the desire for some sense of overall meaning and connectedness, and also for guidance in discernment in specific situations.²¹ This means that wisdom requires an objective as well as a subjective integration or connectedness, and, hence, has an aspect of theoretical learning as well as practical virtue: someone who has a vast knowledge about moral subjects, but who lives foolishly himself, would not be termed wise.²² In Christianity, the Books of Wisdom and the sayings of Jesus, as well as the life stories of people who live by them, are concrete examples of wisdom. But, through literary works and other forms of art, as well as through the lives of secular heroes, secular world-views are treasuries of wisdom too. The focus of Ford's book is to uncover Christian wisdom through an approach that can be summarized as "scriptural-expressivist" in its concern to draw from

¹⁹ Of course, this suggestion does not imply at all that (dogmatic) theology would become obsolete. On the contrary, since Christian faith cannot be reduced to *just* a way of life, in other words, to a contingent lifestyle, but has always presented itself as a truthful way of life, theology has to examine these truth claims critically.

²⁰ David Ford, *Christian Wisdom. Desiring God and Learning in Love* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 1.

²¹ See John Kekes, "Wisdom," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 20, 3 (1983), pp. 277-286.

²² Robert Nozick, *The Examined Life. Philosophical Meditations* (New York: Touchstone Press, 1989), p. 273. Several authors deplore the fact that, since modernity, the tension between theoretical, detached knowledge and life-oriented, engaged love has widened to a complete rift, which has obviously gone at the cost of the more holistic idea of wisdom. See: Ford, *Christian Wisdom*, pp. 269-271; Brenda Almond, "Seeking Wisdom," *Philosophy* 72, 281 (1997), pp. 423-428; Daniel Kaufman, "Knowledge, Wisdom, and the Philosopher," *Philosophy* 81, 1 (2006), pp. 129-151.

reading scripture a lively idiom of Christian wisdom today, one that forms its expression in sustained engagement with scripture's testimony to God and God's purposes amidst the cries of the world."²³

It is not my intention in this section to give a summary of Ford's book, since it mainly draws concrete ideas and practices of wisdom from the Bible, while this paper has a philosophical focus. Rather, I will develop two important examples of Christian wisdom, which Ford discusses in his book, namely, thinking biblically and scriptural reasoning. In particular, I will give a theoretical account of how they can contribute to present Christian faith as an authentic and truthful way of life, which is able to engage in a constructive dialogue with the world of the seekers. In order to do so, I will develop Ford's ideas on the basis of the research that has been done by Paul Ricoeur on linking the philosophic-theological thinking of God to wisdom, and by Nicolas Adams' research on the role of religion in the public debate in a pluralist society.²⁴

It goes without saying that, besides these two examples of Christian wisdom, a lot of others could be given, theoretical as well as practical ones. A practical example that has made quite an impression on me is the charitable work of the Community of San Egidio.²⁵ First of all, this community is one of the best illustrations of what it means to be a kenotic Church. On the basis of a profound Christian spirituality its members offer concrete (material) help to those who are in need, especially to people who, although living in Western societies, are not covered by social security. Through their practical commitment to the underclass, they also exemplify a form of practical Christian wisdom in today's predominantly secular society: for the members of San Egidio, the deep motivation, which enables them to give hope to the needy and, above all, to persevere even in times of adversity, does not result from a contingent way of life, but stems directly from their faith in the truth of the Christian message as source of inspiration and hope for their own lives as well as for all other people, especially for the lives of the needy. The practical wisdom expressed in this example is the following: the more your path of life takes you in the direction of charitable work, the more you need an underpinning that lets you experience that what you do not only matters to others, but also to God, that is, transcendentally. In other words, what

²³ Ford, *Christian Wisdom*, p. 3.

²⁴ Nicolas Adams, *Habermas and Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); André LaCoque and Paul Ricoeur, *Thinking Biblically. Exegetical and Hermeneutical Studies* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

²⁵ For more information on San Egidio, see: http://www.santegidio.org/pageID/2/langID/en/THE_COMMUNITY.html.

you do *really* matters and thus gives you joy, even if the deprived people you work for do not (always) seem to be grateful, and even if you may not see the concrete results of your efforts yourself.

Thinking Biblically

Through his approach to the Bible that he has coined ‘thinking biblically’, Paul Ricoeur presents an alternative to neo-Thomism’s predominantly rationalistic approach of God’s existence and its inability to respond to the existential questions of today’s seekers. Ford reads Ricoeur’s attempt, especially his rereading of Exodus 3:14, as a contribution of prophetic wisdom:

The wisdom is in the way he [Ricoeur] differentiates, interrelates and rebalances several pairs of elements: Exodus 3:14 in its original language and context in conjunction with theology; theology with philosophy; Judaism with Christianity; Old Testament with New Testament; Christianity with Western culture. All this is in the service of rethinking God in such a way as simultaneously to do justice to past thought and worship, to address current issues prophetically, and to open the tradition up to yet further development: in short, the intellectual dimension of learning to live in the Spirit today.²⁶

Before examining Ricoeur’s wisdom-orientated thinking of God’s existence on the basis of Exodus 3:14, let us first take a closer look at his nuanced assessment of the broad and tumultuous conceptual history that “consisted in conjoining God and Being, and whose impact lasted for over fifteen hundred years.”²⁷ First of all, the translation of the original Hebrew text of Exodus 3:14 into Greek and then Latin was a major event in thinking because it linked the original text in an enduring manner to a metaphysical tradition stemming from Plato and Aristotle and continuing until the present day. Thus, this translation contributed in a decisive way to the intellectual and spiritual identity of the Christian West.²⁸ But this long tradition of *conjoining* God and Being did not bring any of the Church fathers and the great Scholastics to *confuse* God’s direct revelation

²⁶ Ford, *Christian Wisdom*, p. 217.

²⁷ Paul Ricoeur, “From Interpretation to Translation,” *Thinking Biblically*, p. 356.

²⁸ Therefore, it would be naïve to think that exegesis could coincide, without the mediation of a tradition of reading, with the original signification of the text of Exodus, even with the presumed intention of its author. Cfr. *Ibid.*, p. 332.

in Exodus 3:14 with a philosophical speculation about Being, or to think that this speculation would reveal to human reason the mystery of the divine essence in the intimacy of its innermost nature. Phrased positively, all of them considered the delicate balance between the apophatic tradition, according to which we cannot affirm anything about God, and the tradition of analogy, which holds that Being can be spoken of in affirmative statements, as the frame of reference in their thinking about God. "Apophatism and ontology thus ran along together side by side."²⁹

However, modern philosophy, and neo-Thomism in particular, upset this delicate balance. Ricoeur shows this by giving a critical analysis of what Gilson called the 'metaphysics of Exodus', according to which "Exodus lays down the principle from which Christian philosophy will be suspended."³⁰ This illustrates Gilson's claim that philosophy, in particular (neo-Thomist) ontology, naturally agrees with Christian faith. Neo-Thomism's stress on the natural character of this agreement is substantiated by the fact that it attached a far greater importance to the proofs of God's existence than Thomas Aquinas himself had done, and consequently, not only claimed to know *that* God is, but also *what* he is. This shows that neo-Thomism failed to do justice to the apophatic tradition that had been dear to Aquinas.³¹

In contrast to contemporary post-metaphysical philosophers like Heidegger, Levinas, and Marion, who think that the statement that Being is the proper name of God and that this name designates God's very essence is an aberration,³² Ricoeur takes a more nuanced position in this debate: he admits that "the rapprochement between the God of the Scriptures and the Being of the philosophers remains historically contingent and speculatively fragile."³³ It is contingent because nothing in Greek thought pointed to a fusion of God and Being. Moreover, this rapprochement is also speculatively fragile because the difference

²⁹ Ibid., p. 342.

³⁰ See: Etienne Gilson, *The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy (Gifford lectures 1931-1932)* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1936), p. 51. Quoted in: Ricoeur, "From Interpretation to Translation," p. 353.

³¹ Ricoeur notes, however, that in the *Summa* "the first question posed concerning God shifts attention to the 'existential' aspect of *esse*, as though the question of existence takes priority over that of the name." See Ibid., p. 352.

³² Peter Jonkers, "God in France: Heidegger's Legacy," *God in France. Eight Contemporary French Thinkers on God* (Leuven, Paris, Dudley MA: Peeters, 2005), pp. 1-42 ; Ricoeur, "From Interpretation to Translation," pp. 355-359.

³³ Ibid., p. 353. Ricoeur notes that Gilson, shortly before his death in 1978, admitted the contingency and fragility of this conjunction, although he still supported it almost half a century before. This shift in Gilson's position is a clear illustration of neo-Thomism's declining plausibility.

between the God of the philosophers and the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Pascal) remains insurmountable. The overall result is that “we find ourselves confronted with the nonphilosophical origin of God and his nonnecessity for philosophy.”³⁴ This implies that the event in thinking that has brought about the rapprochement between God and Being can, and should, according to many contemporary philosophers and theologians, be made undone as a consequence of a shift from its being plausible to its being suspect. Ricoeur, for his part, draws another conclusion. He accepts this rapprochement, in spite of its contingent and fragile character, as a historical fact that has shaped the intellectual and spiritual identity of the Christian West. Hence, it cannot, and should not, simply be rejected, but needs to be reinterpreted. In Ricoeur’s view, it is crucial for Christian faith that the philosophical communicability of the ‘wisdom for God’ is restored, which requires that the break between Exodus 3:14 and philosophical reason is reconsidered. Only then can the sapiential point of this Bible verse and, more in general, its significance for Western culture be preserved. Hence, he asks: “Why not assume that Exodus 3:14 was ready from the very beginning to add a new region of significance to the rich polysemy of the verb being, explored in other terms by the Greeks and their Muslim, Jewish and Christian heirs.”³⁵

In order to uncover the sapiential dimension of Exodus 3:14, Ricoeur starts with formulating some working hypotheses. The first one is that great religious texts express modes of thought that differ from philosophy and cannot be reduced to it, but nevertheless give rise to philosophical thinking. These texts belong to a kind of discourse that is not scientifically descriptive or explanatory, or even apologetic, argumentative, or dogmatic, but whose metaphorical language expresses profound wisdom.³⁶ With this hypothesis, Ricoeur not only takes distance from neo-Thomism’s natural agreement between metaphysics and Christian faith, but also from the post-metaphysical idea that the equation of God and Being is an intellectual aberration. Instead, he encourages us to think in a sapiential way the revelation of God’s name in relation to the verb Being.

A second working hypothesis concerns the relation between the Scriptures and the historical communities of reading and interpretation. A hermeneutical circle imposes itself here: in interpreting its Scriptures, the community in question interprets itself. A mutual election takes place here between those texts taken as foundational and the community that is founded by them. But this relation is also characterized by a fundamental asymmetry: the founding text *teaches* and the community *receives*

³⁴ Ibid., p. 354.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 341; see also p. 360.

³⁶ André LaCoque and Paul Ricoeur, “Preface,” *Thinking Biblically*, p. xvi.

instruction, which implies that, in this regard, faith is nothing other than the confession of this asymmetry. Readers and interpreters don't have to share the faith of this community, but if they want to enter this hermeneutical circle, they have to participate at least by way of imagination and sympathy in the act of adhesion by which the historical community recognizes itself as founded and comprised in and by this particular body of texts.³⁷

Which, then, are the essential elements of a wisdom-oriented interpretation of Exodus 3:14, and in what sense do they differ from the traditional ontological or ontotheological interpretation? First of all, keeping in mind the polysemy of the verb 'Being', we should guard against any ontological abstraction, or, more generally speaking, against any claim to intellectual mastery regarding this verb.³⁸ God's self-presentation and the complementary recognition of his 'being' by the faithful form an asymmetrical pair in which the one who presents himself holds the initiative, whereas the recognition implies a 'responsive' attitude. As tributaries of the apophatic tradition, medieval thinkers have heeded this warning against an (intellectual) appropriation of God's name far more than modern philosophy, including neo-Thomism.

Guarding the interpretation of Exodus 3:14 from ontological abstraction means, first of all, giving priority to Christian faith as a tradition of wisdom. But because this priority does not mean to sever the relation between faith and reason, it is legitimate to reflect on Christian wisdom philosophically in order to make it understandable to others. The idea that the metaphorical language of great religious texts expresses profound wisdom connects the narrative and the reflective dimension of religion. Thus, not only does it contribute to bridging the well-known opposition between the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and the God of the philosophers and scientists, but it can also bridge the disjunction between the longstanding reflective tradition of Christian faith and the world of the seekers, which is dominated by narratives of all kinds. In order to engage in a constructive dialogue with the seekers, faith should be first communicated through the Christian narrative and the wisdom that is embedded in it. Because this narrative is connected to a reflective tradition, it is possible to think it philosophically and rephrase this narrative in a more conceptual way so that it, finally, can be linked to the existential questions of today's seekers, inside and outside the Church, and gives them food for thought. Taken together, these three steps exemplify Christian wisdom as a hermeneutical process, which can be offered as an authentic and truthful orientation to the seekers who are willing to enter this hermeneutical circle themselves.

³⁷ Ibid., p. xvi f.

³⁸ Ricoeur, "From Interpretation to Translation," p. 335.

This hermeneutical space, which is opened by the insight that God's self-revelation always transcends its recognition and conceptualization by humans, shows a further aspect of Christian wisdom: no instance, including the Church, may use his name in vain, e.g., by appropriating it, or reducing it to a set of fixed doctrinal formulas. In other words, fulfilling the commandment to do God's will does not reduce humans to spiritual automates, but encourages them to seek what letting their lives be oriented by God offers them and requires from them in a concrete situation. Especially in our times of radical lifestyle pluralism, every claim to infallible truth on doctrinal grounds is met with suspicion. In order to convince people of the existential truth of Christian faith, the idea of Christian wisdom as offering an authentic and truthful 'orientation in life' is far more appealing, especially to the seekers.

In order to further explain the hermeneutical nature of our orientation in existential matters, and hence of wisdom, I refer to Kant's essay on orientation.³⁹ Every kind of orientation requires a subjective principle: to orientate oneself in moral, or more generally speaking, existential matters means "to be guided, in one's conviction of truth, by a subjective principle of reason where objective principles of reason are inadequate."⁴⁰ This is so because we feel, on the one hand, an urgent (subjective) need to pass a true judgment about our life-orientations, while, on the other hand, we are painfully aware of the lack of objective knowledge that would make such a judgment univocally and universally true. In other words, to orientate oneself in moral matters is neither a matter of just doing whatever come to one's mind nor of objective science. So, the hermeneutical nature of wisdom lies in the fact that it is situated between doctrinal dogmatism and a contingent opinion.⁴¹ This means that the idea of Christian wisdom can be offered to the seekers as a plausible way out from their predicament of being caught between their gut feeling that all religions are contingent social constructions and their need for an authentic and truthful orientation in life.

Finally, "it seems reasonable to take the formula in Exodus 3:14 as an emphatic expansion of the self-presentation of God," thereby creating "an exceptional hermeneutical situation, namely the opening to a plurality of interpretations of the verb [being] used here."⁴² This plurality ranges

³⁹ Immanuel Kant, "Was heißt: sich im Denken orientieren," *Werke in zehn Bänden. Band 5: Schriften zur Metaphysik und Logik* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1975), pp. 267-283.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 270, footnote.

⁴¹ For an analysis of the implications of Kant's idea of orientation in existential matters for philosophy of religion, see Peter Jonkers, "Redefining Religious Truth as a Challenge for Philosophy of Religion," *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 4 (2012): 139-159.

⁴² Ricoeur, "From Interpretation to Translation," p. 336, 337.

from the evocation of the personal God of Israel to the manifold meanings of the notion of Being. It is essential to keep this plurality in mind; it means that the revelation of God's name belongs to a different order than a speculation on Being, although these two orders have been conjoined since the beginning of Christianity. Hence, the ontological speculation about the neuter Being should not obliterate the theological reflection about the first person expression of God's name. From the perspective of Christian wisdom, this means that God remains first of all someone to whom we can pray, and someone whom we believe hears our prayers. In order to do justice to this idea, a paraphrastic translation of Exodus 3:14 is needed. In this context, Ricoeur refers to the one proposed by the modern Jewish thinker Franz Rosenzweig, for whom this paraphrase serves to underscore the shift from the neuter to the first person and, thus, from theoretical speculation to Christian wisdom.⁴³ Rosenzweig's translation does not identify God with eternal Being, or even with the existent, but with the existing (*der Daseiende*), present to the Dasein of human beings. Such a paraphrastic translation of Exodus 3:14 does "not convey a complete break with the verb *Sein*, but rather another extension of its polysemy."⁴⁴ But, at the same time, underscoring God as a person and, thus, closely relating him to the lives of human beings, highlights the sapiential dimension of Christian faith and offers the seekers of our times an authentic and true companion who orients their lives.

Scriptural Reasoning

Given the pluralist character of contemporary society and the experienced contingency of all its religions and secular worldviews, a second way in which the Church can open itself up to the world of the seekers is through a positive engagement with their religious and secular lifestyles, but without having to give up the sacredness of its scriptures or having to translate them into the language of secular reason. Ford proposes scriptural reasoning, understood as a wisdom-seeking engagement with Jewish, Christian, and Muslim scriptures, as a concrete way to realize such a dialogue.⁴⁵ Historically speaking, the reading of sacred scriptures has been overwhelmingly an intra-traditional affair, and scriptural reasoning, which is by definition inter-traditional, has been hardly encouraged by the

⁴³ Ibid., p. 360f. As a translation of Exodus 3:14, Rosenzweig suggests: "Ich werde dasein, als der ich dasein werde... ICH BIN DA schickt mich zu euch."

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 361.

⁴⁵ Ford, *Christian Wisdom*, p. 273. It has to be noted that scriptural reasoning refrains from theorizing its own bases, but consists of the practice of scriptural reasoning. For a description of this practice see: Ibid., pp. 275-278, and Adams, *Habermas and Theology*, pp. 239-243.

particular traditions of the participants. Therefore, engaging in such a reasoning requires, from a Catholic perspective, that the Church must take leave from the triumphalism and self-centeredness that characterized ultramontane mass Catholicism and become kenotic again; obviously, the same holds true for the participants from other religious traditions. This means that all of them have to “acknowledge the *sacredness* of the others’ scriptures to them (without having to acknowledge its authority for oneself),” as well as acknowledge that “they do not exclusively own their scriptures – they are *not experts on its final meaning*.”⁴⁶ However, if scriptural reasoning is meant to be relevant to the vast world of the seekers, most of whom only marginally or do not at all belong to one of the established religious traditions, it has to be extended to secular worldviews, as I will show at the end of this section.

Scriptural reasoning starts with recognizing that each tradition’s scripture is at the heart of its identity, because scriptures are formative for understanding God and God’s purposes, for prayer, worship and liturgy, for normative teaching, for imagination and ethos, etc. Sacred scriptures contain also long chains of reasoning, argumentation, and conclusions, where communal identities are expressed at a profound level. So, scriptural reasoning prevents these traditions from being treated as contingent social constructions. In order to show how these chains of deep reasoning can orientate the lives of people today they have to be made public. Scriptural reasoning fulfils this task by bringing together the interpretation of sacred scriptures, the practices of philosophical and theological reasoning, and ‘public issue’ questions.⁴⁷ But, as is common knowledge, each of these scriptures can also be used to frame the identity of a tradition in a problematic way, e.g., by opposing it to other identities, legitimatizing violence, claiming superiority, pronouncing blanket condemnations, etc.⁴⁸ This refers to the pitfall of one (religious) tradition striving for exclusive recognition, as pointed out in the third section of this paper. In order to avoid this and other pitfalls, scriptural reasoning acknowledges the *sacredness* of these scriptures to the members of each tradition, but without acknowledging their *authority* to others. The result is that scriptural reasoning is polyphonic and cannot be reduced to an authoritarian monologue of one tradition, distorting all the other ones.

But the need to avoid the pitfall of a monological distortion of other traditions does not only concern religions, but also secular worldviews. The separation of state and church, which characterizes all democratic

⁴⁶ Ford, *Christian Wisdom*, pp. 279f. See also Adams, *Habermas and Theology*, p. 243.

⁴⁷ Ford, *Christian Wisdom*, pp. 277, 279; Adams, *Habermas and Theology*, p. 242.

⁴⁸ Ford, *Christian Wisdom*, p. 274.

societies, does not mean that religious deep reasonings may be put on the procrustean bed of secular rationality; nor can the acceptability of these reasonings in politics, let alone in the public debate, be judged by the standards of this rationality. In other words, in order to keep democratic society truly polyphonic, it is essential to realize that the separation of state and church cannot be used as a pretext to exclude religious convictions from the public debate, and even less that secular liberalism is the only acceptable philosophy of life.⁴⁹ In sum, as I have shown in the previous section, the recognition of the sacredness of the Scriptures to a community that is founded by them does not require secular people to acknowledge the authority of these scriptures for themselves. But when these people enter the hermeneutical circle of the public debate, they are required to accept the idea that Christian faith expresses a kind of wisdom that can be interpreted philosophically, and, hence, offers food for thought to them. This philosophical interpretation of Christian wisdom serves as a common ground for secular and religious people.

The above shows that scriptural reasoning can mediate between the sacred scriptures of different religions, as well as between religions and secular worldviews. It realizes this aim by making deep (religious) reasonings public so that others, religious as well as secular people, may learn to understand them and discover why particular trains of reasoning are *reasonings*, and not just particular assumptions, contingent social constructions, and why they are attractive or problematic.⁵⁰ In other words, scriptural reasoning enables religious and secular traditions to be recognized by people who do not belong to this specific tradition, but without having to accept any claim for *exclusive* recognition. It is able to fulfill this task because it is a manifestation of religious wisdom, which is the fruit of a much broader kind of rationality than, say, the rationalistic, foundational kind of rationality of neo-Thomism. As pointed out above, wisdom, including Christian wisdom, is embedded in the sacred scriptures of religious traditions and in the key texts of secular traditions, all of them trying to respond to the existential questions and needs of people.

Hence, scriptural reasoning is able to understand deep religious and secular reasonings in their own right. They aim at establishing a hermeneutical space that is shared by various religious and secular traditions. This shared space does not so much rest on a specific type of

⁴⁹ In a similar vein, Rawls distinguishes between public reason, which is the basis of political liberalism as a political conception and therefore has to be secular, and secular reason as an element of liberalism as a comprehensive doctrine. See John Rawls, *Political Liberalism. Expanded Edition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), p. 200.

⁵⁰ Adams, *Habermas and Theology*, p. 242; see also Ford, *Christian Wisdom*, p. 281.

rationality, e.g., the procedural approach of Habermas and Rawls (see below), but is the result of the shared existential issues to which all religions and secular worldviews are trying to respond. In this context, it is also important to note that the fact that scriptural reasoning is aimed at a shared space by making the reasonings of religious and secular traditions public, does not mean that it strives after consensus, but rather after friendship, that is, the recognition of the sacred nature of each other's scriptures and a shared desire to study them.

As Adams has shown, scriptural reasoning offers a promising alternative to the views of Habermas and Rawls, two prominent philosophers who have studied the place of religions in democratic and, hence, pluralist societies.⁵¹ As noted above, all participants in scriptural reasoning acknowledge the sacredness of the others' scriptures to them without necessarily acknowledging its authority for themselves. This dissociation of sacredness and authority is puzzling for Habermas as well as for Rawls; they stress, instead, that these two characteristics of religious scriptures are two sides of the same coin, and infer from this the intrinsically authoritarian and exclusivist character of religious traditions. Since this authoritarianism leaves, in their eyes, no room for tolerable disagreement, recognizing the sacred character of these scriptures is at odds with the liberal character of modern democracies. Therefore, religious insights have to be translated into a secular language (Habermas),⁵² or comply with the so-called proviso (Rawls), if non-public, religious reason is to be introduced in the political sphere.⁵³ However, if religious traditions are required to make their deep reasonings public under the conditions of secular reason, they are not understood anymore in their own right, since they not only have to give up the authority, but also the sacredness of their scriptures. This is so because the sacredness of these texts precludes their translation in another, in particular secular, language just as, for similar reasons, a poem cannot simply be restated in other words.

How, then, can scriptural reasoning realize the recognition of the sacred character of sacred scriptures, while avoiding that this recognition becomes exclusive? The answer is that it only coordinates discussions between members of different traditions without requiring a commitment

⁵¹ Adams, *Habermas and Theology*, pp. 243-246.

⁵² Jürgen Habermas, *The Future of Human Nature* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003), p. 109.

⁵³ For Rawls, non-public, religious reasons may be introduced in the public political discussion, "provided that in due course proper political reasons – and not reasons given solely by comprehensive doctrines – are presented that are sufficient to support whatever the comprehensive doctrines are said to support." See John Rawls, "The Idea of Public Reason Revisited," *Political Liberalism*, p. 462.

to a universal sphere that transcends those traditions, in particular, a commitment to secular reason. Participants engage in scriptural reasoning only as members of a particular tradition, and acknowledge no authority above that of their own tradition than the authority of God. But by doing so, they acknowledge that God is not circumscribed by their tradition, but is the non-circumscribable possibility of its very existence. "God is greater than language, greater than traditions, greater than scripture."⁵⁴ The crucial difference between a secular, horizontal idea of transcendence (secular reason) and a religious, vertical one (God) is that the former can be claimed by a particular group, while the latter cannot. Hence, the people committed to religious traditions may be far more inclined to accept scriptural reasoning as the appropriate way to make their deep reasonings public than when they are required to fulfill the proviso or to translate them into the language of secular reason.

Moreover, secular reason can only realize a *neutral* space to which anyone or no-one belongs. This corresponds to Rawls' idea of public reason, which he defines as "the kind of reasons they [i.e., citizens] may reasonably give one another when fundamental political questions are at stake. I [i.e., Rawls] propose that in public reason comprehensive doctrines [religious, philosophical, and moral] of truth or right be replaced by an idea of the politically reasonable addressed to citizens as citizens."⁵⁵ By contrast, scriptural reasoning prepares a *shared* space, which means that the members of religious traditions accept the claim that the other belongs there without stating further conditions as to the nature of their reasonings. This explains why it is aimed at friendship, resulting from respectfully studying religious traditions, rather than at consensus on specific issues.

A final reason why scriptural reasoning offers a promising alternative to the requirement to translate religious insights into secular rationality is that it does not make a strong contrast between argumentation and narrative. This approach is contrary to that of Habermas and Rawls, who focus on the argumentative value of non-public, religious reason and neglect the narrative nature of sacred scriptures. Yet, because scriptural reasoning brings together the interpretation of sacred scriptures, the practices of philosophical and theological reasoning, and 'public issue' questions, there is argumentation at every stage of it. This is so because, again, scriptural reasoning is an expression of religious wisdom, which is a unity of faith and reason, and is practiced in a shared, not in a neutral, space. In other words, through its origin in religious wisdom, scriptural reasoning manifests a broader kind

⁵⁴ Adams, *Habermas and Theology*, p. 249.

⁵⁵ Rawls, "The Idea of Public Reason Revisited," p. 441.

of reasonableness than secular reason, and is therefore able to include argumentation *and* narration.

In sum, “the crucial feature of scriptural reasoning [...] is that it does not require participants to bracket or suspend or conceal their traditional identities for the purpose of conversation and argumentation,”⁵⁶ as secular reason does. Instead, by making deep religious reasonings public, scriptural reasoning enables the participants to see the wisdom embedded in their own and others’ traditions. Ideally, this kind of reasoning can be used by the Church to bridge its disjunction with the seekers and their – often implicit – worldviews. It could encourage them to see the wisdom that is embedded in their own worldviews so that they don’t see them anymore as contingent social constructions. In comparison to the secular rationality proposed by Habermas and Rawls as a common, neutral ground, I am convinced that scriptural reasoning offers a far better way for discussing (religious and secular) ways of life in a radically pluralist society because it rests on a shared ground and is aimed at friendship instead of consensus.

CONCLUSION

The leading question of this volume is how the Catholic Church, being in a minority position in most Western societies, can overcome its disjunction with the seekers and appeal again to society at large, and especially to the seekers. In this paper, I have tried to contribute to answering this question from a philosophical perspective. This means that the ‘how’ in the overcoming of this disjunction is discussed on a principled, not on an empirical, level. Furthermore, I tried to comply with one of Ricoeur’s working hypotheses, namely, to enter in a hermeneutical circle, which is required in order to interpret Christian faith from a philosophical perspective without reducing it to something that is at odds with its interpretation by the Christian community. To phrase it positively, my interpretation has been based on a deep sympathy with Christian faith, although, at the same time, I had to keep some distance from it, as is required by the philosophical character of my interpretation in contrast to a theological approach.

The core of my answer is, first of all, that the paradoxical nature of the relation of the Church to the world, namely, of being *in* but not *of* the world, prevents it from wanting to overcome its existing disjunction with (the seekers in) contemporary society by identifying itself completely with it. Besides this fundamental theological reason, there is also an important philosophical reason for choosing a different approach: given the fact that so many people are caught in a predicament of being

⁵⁶ Adams, *Habermas and Theology*, p. 252.

convinced of the contingency of their ways of life and, at the same time, desperately looking for an authentic and truthful orientation, the Church should offer Christian wisdom as a way out of this situation. In the last sections of my paper, I have discussed several examples of Christian wisdom, but, of course, there are many more. However, in order to be effective, the Church should take into account that it is, and will remain for the foreseeable future, in a minority position in most Western societies, as well as that the latter are fundamentally marked by expressive individualism and radical pluralism. This means that it can by no means operate anymore from a position of power, as it used to do during the times of ultramontane mass Catholicism, but has to redefine itself in a kenotic way. Apart from the fact that, from a sociological perspective, there is no alternative for this new stance, it also is the best option for religious reasons: as long as the Church relied on its worldly power it was too worldly and was, thus, paradoxically, unable to truly open itself up to the world. Therefore, it should instead start with taking the predicament of today's seekers radically serious and refrain from overwhelming them with fixed, pre-given answers. This opens a hermeneutical space for asking questions about existential truth, meaning, and hope. In this situation, the Church can offer its tradition of wisdom as an authentic and truthful perspective on the world.

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